

The Vision of a Tutor: Individual Initiative and Community Building

From the beginning of the Four Year Plan when the Bahá'í world embarked on the enterprise of establishing a network of training institutes, it was expressed in messages of the Universal House of Justice that this training would endow believers with “the spiritual insights, the knowledge, and the skills needed to carry out the many tasks of accelerated expansion and consolidation, including the teaching and deepening of a large number of people—adults, youth, and children.” Through participation in institute programs the friends would “develop abilities of service” and be enabled “to intensify [their] individual...exertions in the teaching field.” Although this purpose was generally understood from the inception of the training institutes, the effectiveness of the institute process in raising up believers who were “trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops” has now been strikingly illustrated in an approach that demonstrates what a single tutor with a vision for growth can accomplish.

In the country where this approach originated, each pioneer acted as the initiator of several study circles with the aim of having 20 seekers involved. The objective was to enable five of these participants to eventually become tutors on their own, constituting the second generation, each of whom would likewise work with another 20 seekers. Thus, the original pioneer would in time follow the progress on this spiritual path of 120 individuals, 20 of his own direct contacts and 100 others.

Initially this mode of growth revolved principally around study circles, but when it was taken to another region of the world and implemented by a local homefront pioneering couple, both of whom were trained tutors, all three core activities were utilized to engage a network of seekers. Beginning with a children's class for the neighborhood children, the couple then turned their attention to the parents, who very naturally became attracted to devotional meetings and study circles, resulting in a number of them becoming Bahá'ís. These new believers proceeded through the sequence of courses, tutored by this couple, and ultimately started a second generation of core activities with their friends and families.

Here is an approach that illustrates a scope for individual initiative that was previously not imagined. In a short time, a Bahá'í tutor may have 20 to 40 persons he or she is working with. Groups of individuals, or often a number of families in a neighborhood, are connected to each other through a tutor, and they are collectively walking a path of spiritual progress and becoming a nascent Bahá'í community. In describing the impact of this approach, the House of Justice explained to a National Spiritual Assembly:

In this way, a handful of believers can significantly extend the spiritual influence of the institute and lay a strong foundation for the accelerated expansion of the community.

Having observed the effectiveness of this practical approach in a number of countries and settings, we wish to share with you some examples from the field that will give a vivid picture of how one individual or family can “extend the spiritual influence of the institute,” and almost single-handedly develop a cluster and advance the process of entry by troops.

HOMEFRONT PIONEER AND HIS FAMILY RAISE A CLUSTER FROM “D” TO “B” IN LESS THAN TWO YEARS

Thiruvavarur Cluster, India

Raising up a community can be a family affair. One family in India put their training in the institute process to good use and achieved wonderful results. These homefront pioneers settled in an unopened town in late January 2003. The day after they moved into their new home, they held a traditional milk boiling ceremony for their neighbors to celebrate entering a new house. This ceremony with its prayers provided a natural avenue for meeting and mingling with their new neighbors.

The family prayed earnestly during the next week for divine assistance for their teaching work. They invited their neighbors to a meeting to discuss the importance of the spiritual education of children, but no one came. So they tried another approach. They opened their home to seven children from the neighborhood and taught them a few prayers and moral virtues such as obedience and truthfulness. Parents noticed a transformation in their children, including the flowering of previously untapped artistic talents that the Bahá'ís had brought out in the classes. The parents made inquiries, which provided the opening needed by the couple to seek their support for children's classes.

Another meeting for parents on the spiritual education of children was arranged and this time they came. Not only was the education of children discussed but also basics about the Bahá'í Faith. The children's classes continued. The parents also agreed to send their youth to a study circle, which was quickly organized for eight youth. The trust and respect of the parents grew as they witnessed the growing positive changes in their offspring.

The family continued to teach the Faith to those they met in the area and hosted a grand feast for their neighbors to celebrate Naw Rúz. The next day two people accepted the Faith, the first of many.

In April, three months after their arrival in the town, the first devotional meeting for the area was held at the new Bahá'í Centre with 36 people in attendance. At Ridván, 17 adults elected the first Local Spiritual Assembly, which held the first Nineteen Day Feast for the community in mid-May.

With core activities and Bahá'í administration in place, the family and new believers turned their attention to surrounding villages in the cluster. They would first visit the village chief and explain a little about the Faith but more about the importance of spiritual education of children. With his permission and after also giving the same explanations to parents, a children's class would be established. This was usually quickly followed by the establishment of a study circle for youth. This process was repeated successfully in a number of outlying areas. The village chiefs were asked to present certificates to those who completed the institute courses, further cementing the relationship of trust set at the beginning. Consequently there have been few obstacles; in fact, the village chiefs have even summoned the villagers with loudspeakers to come and listen to the Bahá'ís. And as the children's classes and study circles become successful in one village, people in the next village hear about them and ask that they be established in their community as well.

The individual primarily behind this successful endeavor describes his experience:

We would first start the children's class and would explain about the virtues and teach them songs and dance. All would come to see this and would be happy and praise us. We

would explain to them in detail about the coming of Bahá'u'lláh and we would also derive a lot of joy in associating with them. They would look at us, following the Bahá'í way of life and would wonder at the absence of conflict, contention, and strife amongst us and how we would listen to each other. We would recite the Tablet of Ahmad everyday and its power gave us a lot of transformation.

As a result of our individual teaching activities, about 70 people accepted the Faith. A teaching project involving the institute graduates resulted in 103 new believers. Another teaching project resulted in 34 new believers. Non-Bahá'ís attending a study circle accepted the Faith at the end of the course. Now there are about 280 believers in our cluster. All the youth are studying the institute courses. We are also making efforts to involve all their parents in the study of the institute courses. I am unable to write or speak further. Today there are 54 devotional meetings, 24 children's classes, 21 study circles, and 2 junior youth groups in Thiruvavur. We earnestly pray to the Ancient Beauty who is responsible for all of this.

A LITTLE COMMUNITY ON THE MOVE

Portishead, England

A married couple who regularly attended the weekly fireside in Portishead were reaching the point of boredom. Every time anyone new came to the fireside, the conversation went back to basics and these two seekers were clearly no longer advancing in their understanding of the Faith. Their Bahá'í friend who was holding the fireside told them about the course "Reflections on the Life of the Spirit" and they eagerly asked to join, but said that they could attend either the course or the fireside; they did not have time for both. The fireside became a weekly study circle.

Fortunately, the isolated believer who hosted the fireside was also a trained institute tutor. The couple and several others began to go through the sequence of courses. They embraced the Faith. The new believers began devotional meetings as part of the practice component of their course. These proved to be especially attractive to their friends, relatives, and neighbors and led in turn to more people becoming interested in attending study circles.

After that husband and wife declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh during the first year of the Five Year Plan, Portishead began to move forward. They, and others taken through the sequence of courses by that lone tutor, have since initiated many other activities such as regular firesides, more study circles, and a small class for junior youth. Thirteen people from the area have declared—four within the past six months. But their broad community of interest is much larger. Of the new believers, 4 have now completed the sequence of courses and are serving as tutors, with 21 participants in either a study circle or junior youth class. Another 24 people come to Bahá'í events occasionally and usually 30 or so attend the community's Holy Day programs.

As the believer who started it all says, "small and simple is the best way." The new believers and other contacts all live within walking distance and so are very supportive of each other. "We used to think that to teach we had to go far away" but now she understands that it is better to reach out to those who surround our daily life. Those interested investigate the Faith as families, and as they go through the sequence of courses, they practice mainly with their relatives and close friends. Home visits are proving to be especially important. "The home visit is so key because it shows that Bahá'ís are normal—it relaxes people" when contacts get to know the Bahá'ís in their own home.

This veteran believer remarked that in the past she offered anyone who showed interest in the Faith a book, but now she invites them to a study circle. The devotional meetings have become the primary means of attracting people. For example, when asked what Bahá'ís do, she responds that we meet and pray in each other's homes and that we have very beautiful prayers. She still holds firesides occasionally; her approach is to hold four weeks of introductory firesides for a limited period to prepare new participants for the study circles. And at times small advertisements are used in the local paper to attract people.

Even the junior youth class began quite naturally. One family of new believers had a junior youth who would attend study circles with her parents. The tutor would take time out to give her a small lesson. This youth then brought a friend to a Holy Day observance who became interested. They invited another school friend to join them and a class was begun. Their junior youth class is held immediately after school at a facility next to their school, which has made it convenient for them. One youth says that the day of her Bahá'í class is her favorite day. Similarly, another family with younger children is now progressing through Ruhi Institute Book 3 with the goal of beginning a children's class.

And it all began with one believer, a tutor.

MOTHERS UNITE THROUGH THE INSTITUTE PROCESS

Chang Hua City and County, Taiwan

A believer in Taiwan took the first step along the path of service and divine assistance followed. Living in Chang Hua City and County cluster, an area with almost no active believers, she took the initiative to begin a Bahá'í-inspired moral education class in a public elementary school. One parent was so impressed by the content of her child's class that she wished to know more. The Bahá'í teacher happened to be a trained tutor so she invited the mother to study Ruhi Institute Book 1. Not only did the mother agree, she asked five of her friends to join her!

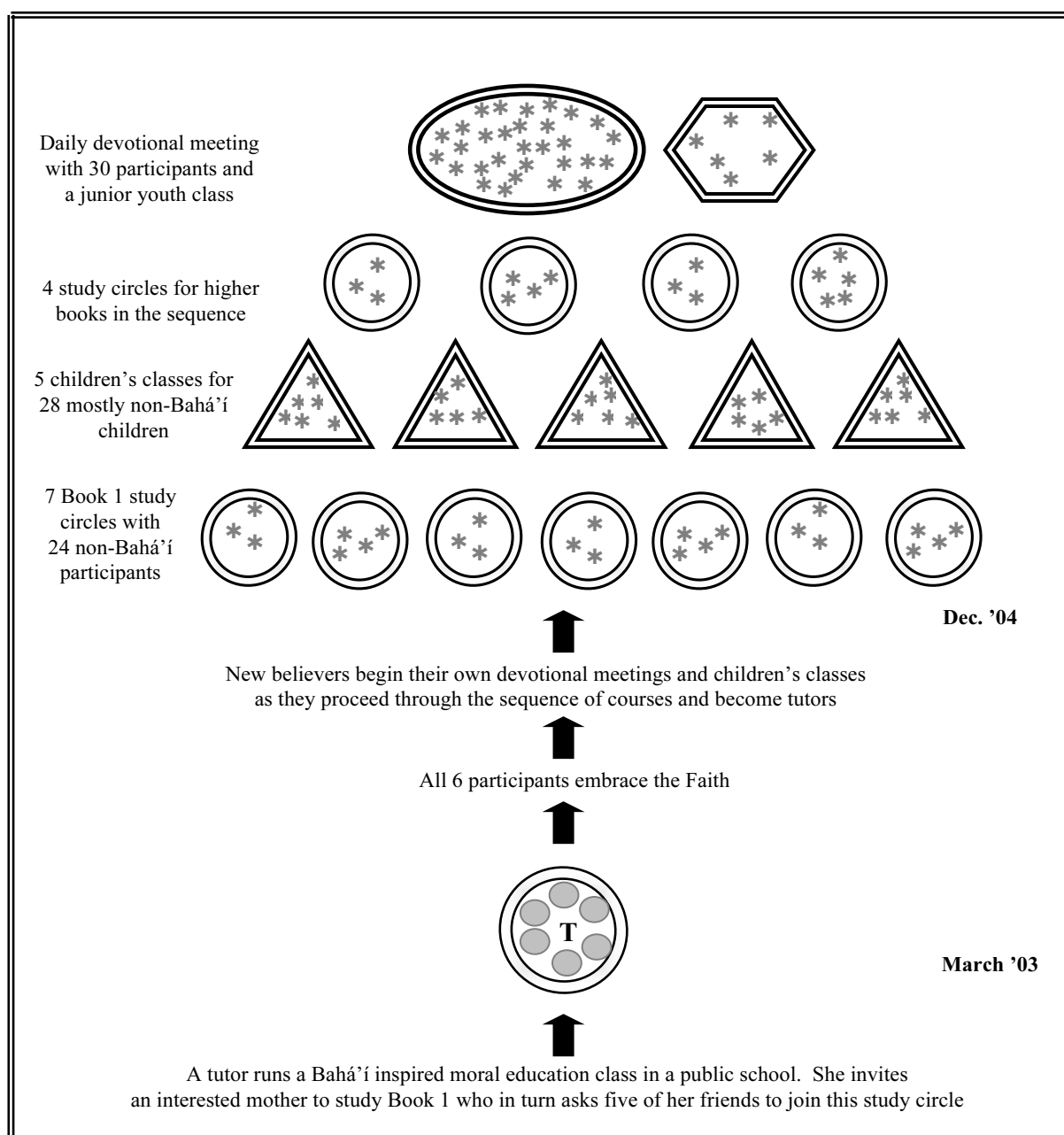
This first study circle in the cluster, which began in March 2003, was held weekly and was supplemented by occasional deepenings on Bahá'í topics. By the time they started Book 2, all six mothers had embraced the Faith. As their faith deepened and their skills were enhanced by what they were learning through the institute process, these new believers began to hold devotional meetings and children's classes on their own. Three of these ladies in particular reached out to their friends, co-workers, and relatives, introducing them to Book 1 as well.

By December 2004, the original six participants in the first study circle had completed the entire sequence of courses. They were carrying out seven Book 1 study circles that included 24 non-Bahá'í participants in addition to four study circles for the higher courses of the sequence. They had established five children's classes for 28 mostly non-Bahá'í children, and were running a daily devotional meeting, which was attracting about 30 people. They even formed a group for junior youth after they observed the positive effect the Bahá'í Teachings had on their younger children. In total, there were 78 people regularly participating in their activities. All of the adults were mothers of preschool or school-aged children.

This group was successful in part because they capitalized on a preexisting social network of mothers with children in the same school. They also began their service together as a group, thereby supporting each other and demonstrating the power of unity. It was only natural that their friends and family would be drawn to the process through them.

While most of these 78 participants in Taiwan have not yet declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh, the community is clearly on its way to becoming strong and well established because it is based upon a firm foundation. As of June 2005, the number of new believers had grown to eleven, reflecting the addition of five friends who declared while studying Book 2. Three people are going through the sequence of courses at an accelerated pace by studying the institute courses 12 hours a week in order to gain additional skills to contribute more effectively to the community.

In a neighborhood steeped in materialism and pastimes such as gambling and gossiping, these friends are inspired as they transform their lives, and in turn motivate others, by walking a spiritual path.



RESULTS OF SOME INTENSIVE PROGRAMS OF GROWTH

- **Cluster 9, Western Colombia:** This predominantly rural area has demonstrated a special receptivity to the Faith for many years and already has 54 Local Spiritual Assemblies. At the end of three weeks of intensive teaching in this cluster, it was reported that 94 teachers had visited 530 people and 292 new believers embraced the Cause. These achievements were the results of efforts in five communities. One community had surpassed its goals in the first two and a half days of the teaching phase.
- **Metropolitan cluster, El Salvador:** During the two-week intensive teaching phase, 51 new believers accepted the Faith. In the previous 12 months, only 4 new believers in this cluster had been enrolled. During the consolidation phase, the teaching has continued and an additional 7 souls have enrolled in the Faith as a result of participation in either study circles or firesides.
- **London, England:** During the expansion phase of the first cycle of its intensive program of growth, 37 teaching teams comprising 155 people were able to introduce the Faith to 513 people and conduct 109 home visits. The community of interest increased by 130 people and there were 5 enrollments. Another 4 individuals have so far declared in the consolidation phase.
- **Ndivisi Webuye cluster, Kenya:** The teaching efforts in the expansion phase resulted in 30 new believers and an increase in the community of interest by 206. All of these friends were integrated into core activities during the consolidation phase with the start of 13 new study circles, 3 children's classes, 2 junior youth groups, and 30 devotional gatherings.
- **Scudai (cluster S1), Malaysia:** At the end of the first day of intensive teaching, 37 believers had visited 44 contacts and of these, 13 accepted the Faith. The two-week campaign had to be ended five days early, as it was so successful that more time had to be allotted to revisit the new declarants and those interested in participating in core activities. By the end of nine days, 190 believers of all ages had participated in the campaign, visiting 108 homes, increasing the community of interest to 393, and enrolling 68 souls.
- **Moscow, Russia:** The intensive program of growth was launched on 12 June. In the expansion phase, 43 participants taught the Faith to 176 people and increased the community of interest by 69 souls. Twenty-eight new devotional meetings and 18 new study circles were started.
- **Singapore:** This city-state comprising one cluster recently completed its two-week intensive teaching effort with remarkable results. The level of participation was high with 68 believers joining 20 teaching teams. By the end of the expansion phase, in addition to enrolling one new believer, the friends had introduced the Faith to 206 individuals. Of these, 103 joined core activities—52 in devotional meetings, 39 in new study circles, 16 in children's classes and 4 in a junior youth class.
- **Kuphelela cluster, Swaziland:** Within the two-week expansion phase of the first cycle, six teams tried a variety of teaching approaches. During that period and the consolidation phase immediately following, 14 people accepted the Faith, exceeding the number of enrollments for the previous 11 months. The first phase has been followed by an intensive home visit campaign.

